

George Washington Birthplace

National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior

George Washington Birthplace
National Monument
Westmoreland County, Virginia



Eventful Christmases of George Washington's Life

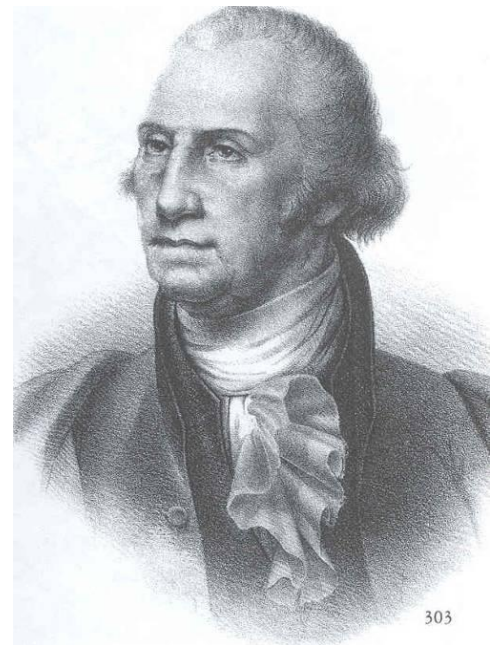
George Washington lived to see over sixty Christmases during his life. Five of those Christmases were marked with different emotions; sadness, happiness, celebration, loss, and success. Each story below expresses one of those sentiments.

A Young Gentleman's Christmas Abroad

George Washington's return from Barbados marked a time of sadness for him. He could see that his older half-brother Lawrence was not recovering from tuberculosis, which would prove fatal. In addition, he spent most of his time on the island sick with smallpox.

Yet when George Washington was 19 years old, he celebrated a very unusual Christmas. He accompanied his older half-brother Lawrence to the Caribbean in the hope the warm weather would cure Lawrence's tuberculosis.

After several weeks it was decided that George would return to Virginia. He celebrated Christmas aboard ship three days after leaving Barbados. His diary notes that the holiday dinner consisted of an Irish goose that had been fattened for the occasion. Throughout the meal multiple toasts were presented to absent friends. This was George's only Christmas celebrated outside the United States and it was to be Lawrence's final before his death.



President George Washington.



Martha Dandridge Custis Washington.
Image courtesy Morristown National Historical Park.

A Twelve Days of Christmas Marriage

This Christmas would mark a very special time for Washington. His marriage to Martha Custis ushered in a whole new era of Washington's life and they would spend the next 40 years as a happy married couple.

During the French and Indian War, Washington served as the commander of militia troops in Virginia. He also served as an advisor to the British in frontier campaigns of Virginia and Pennsylvania throughout the war. His military position kept him in contact with the Virginia colonial government in Williamsburg. During one of those visits he stopped at a friend's house on the Pamunkey River and while there met the widowed and beautiful Martha Dandridge Parke Custis.

He then continued on to Williamsburg and upon his return proposed marriage. Although they had known each other only three weeks, the two planned to wed.

Their marriage would take place on January 6, 1759. This date was known to many as "Twelvth Night" and for others as the "Old Christmas." Martha Dandridge Parke Custis was an ideal match for Washington. She was the wealthiest widow in Virginia and he was a rising political figure known for hard work and leadership skills.

Martha had two children from her first marriage. Her 4 year old son, John Parke Custis or "Jackie," was a lively boy. She also had a beautiful two year old daughter named Patsy.

At around 1:00 p.m. the wedding ceremony was performed at White House by the Reverend David Mossom of Saint Peter’s Church. Martha’s wedding gown was recently purchased from London, and she described it as a “grave...suit of clothes.” Washington also bought a new coat made of an expensive “blue cotton velvet.”

Present at the wedding were about forty guests, who undoubtedly participated in a great feast with countless toasts. Eggnog was a common drink consumed at weddings. Recipes for the drink had their origins from several European countries. Washington concocted his own recipe that included a pint of brandy, some rye whiskey and Jamaican rum. To this mixture Washington added a healthy dose of

mellow sherry to provide the drink with “good fumes.”

After 3 days of parties and dances, the last of the wedding guests left White House. This respite proved brief for the honeymooners. They soon had to attend to business in Williamsburg, pack all of Martha’s belongings and move to Mount Vernon, Washington’s home

Christmas Day Attack on Trenton

With fortunes going against the Americans during the campaigns of 1776, Washington needed a victory to reverse sagging morale. He decided on a daring, surprise attack on the Hessian garrison at Trenton, New Jersey. His attack, which would include traversing the icy Delaware River, led to one of his greatest victories of the war. Coupled with another victory at Princeton, the American army finally had something to celebrate about.

A major strategic and symbolic event of the American Revolution was the crossing of the Delaware River in 1776. After his defeat in New York, General Washington needed a victory to boost his men’s moral. He also knew there was a garrison of German mercenaries located in Trenton, New Jersey.

These Germans, who were usually called Hessians, celebrated Christmas with grand festivities. Some reports note that they had decorated some evergreen trees and drank large amounts of schnapps and beer.

On the evening of December 25, 1776 Washington along with 2,500 soldiers crossed the Delaware River. Since the weather was the worst in it had been all winter, the normally diligent Hessians did not actively worry about an attack. This unusual lack of judgment in the highly trained mercenaries allowed Washington to catch the Hessians sleeping.

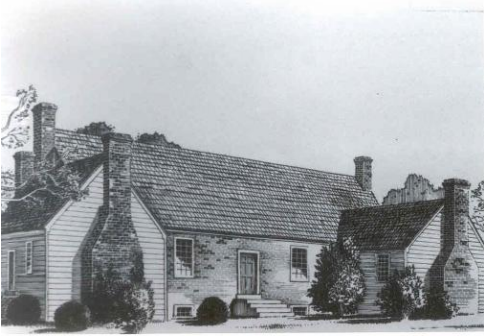
Over 100 Hessians were killed and another 1,000 taken prisoner. Only a few Americans died in the execution of the battle and future President James Monroe was among the injured. This battle invigorated Washington’s army and inspired them to another victory a week later at Princeton.

This event was immortalized in a famous painting by Emanuel Leutze. His artistic license allowed him to embellish the actual events of the crossing. James Monroe and the African-American soldier, Prince Whipple, are both visible on Washington’s boat but actually crossed the river in separate boats from General Washington. The use of the “Stars and Stripes” flag is also inaccurate since this banner would not be used for another half a year



Washington Crossing the Delaware
by Emanuel Leutze.
Lieutenant James Monroe is the soldier
shown holding the United States flag.

A Christmas Day Fire



A speculative image of the Birth House prior to the fire on Christmas Day in 1779.

This Christmas tragedy would strike. The birthplace home of Washington would catch fire and while the Washington family saved what they could, the house burnt to the ground. This loss of Washington's birthplace is still felt today, as only conjectured images of what this house would have looked like exist.

George Washington was born in a modest home along Popes Creek on February 22, 1732. The property went to George's half-brother Austin in 1743 upon their father's death. In 1774 George's nephew, William Augustine Washington, would later inherited the site. While George kept close ties with his family, the tensions of the Revolution ended his visits to his birth-house in 1771.

On Christmas Day in 1779, William Augustine Washington and some guests returned from a midday ride. They discovered that the roof of the house was ablaze. Legend has a spark from the chimney igniting a pile of cottonseed on fire

The family salvaged what they could during the fire. The tea table visible today in the Memorial House's Withdrawing Room may have been rescued from the house. Most of the bricks were scavenged, but in 1936 a few hundred deeply laid bricks were recovered in an archeological dig.

Retiring After 8 Years at War

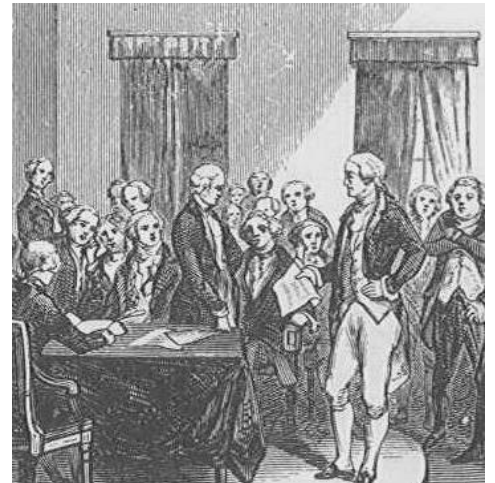
After serving as commander of the American army for seven years Washington resigned his sword. He had led American to success and victory during the war and wanted nothing more than to return to his beloved Mount Vernon and retirement.

On December 23, 1783, the Congress assembled at the State House in Annapolis. Martha Washington was present to witness the resignation of her husband as the Commander-in-Chief. Early the next day, Washington head home to his home, Mount Vernon.

A young girl saw Washington's first Christmas back at home. She noted, "The servants were in great glee, they came from all quarters to get a glimpse of their idol. The General, much affected, received them on the front veranda; some (the old ones) were in tears, others were in raptures of mirth."

One relative, who welcomed General Washington home, wrote to a friend, "I must tell you what a charming day I spent at Mount Vernon. The General and Madame came home on Christmas Eve, and such a racket as the servants made! They were glad of their coming. Three handsome young officers came with them. All Christmas afternoon people came to pay their respects and duty. Among these were stately dames and gay young women. The General seemed very happy and Mrs. Washington was up before daybreak making everything as agreeable as possible for everybody."

Upon his return to Mount Vernon, Washington hoped to leave public service for domestic life. Yet in 1789 he would spend his Christmas as the first President of the United States.



General George Washington's resignation at the State House in Annapolis, Maryland.

As these five accounts relate, George Washington's Christmases would have been a time of many emotions. Much like today, holidays in Washington's life was a time to understand the past, to celebrate, and to remember the emotions that make them special.

